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SUBJECT: Nuclear-Powered Nimitz Visits Chennai: The Only Emission Is Goodwill

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The July 2-5 visit of USS Nimitz to Chennai was an overwhelming success, overcoming criticism, protests, and bureaucratic hurdles to make an indelible impression on the bilateral strategic relationship. Citing the incident-free shore visits by thousands of sailors and their ready engagement in numerous community relations projects at schools, orphanages and tsunami-affected villages, one national newsmagazine concluded

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"Goodwill, clearly, seems to be the only fallout of this nuclear warship's visit." Also significant is the estimated \$1.5 million that the visit injected into the Chennai economy, not to mention the military-to-military engagement that was a central purpose of the visit. Our hats are off to the officers and crew of Nimitz and its sister ship USS Pinckney for their professionalism, hospitality, flexibility and superb representation of the U.S. and the USN. END SUMMARY.

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Chennaiities, Media Are Awed  
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12. (U) The public diplomacy impact of the Nimitz visit is difficult to overstate from both the media and people-to-people perspectives. Nimitz literally dominated local media for more than a week and attracted significant national attention, with positive reports far outnumbering critical ones. The heavy community relations (COMREL) schedule (see below) generated numerous "feel good" news stories involving the sailors on each day of the visit. The intensity of the coverage was, in our experience, paralleled only by President Bush's March 2006 visit to Hyderabad.

13. (U) On the people-to-people side, the Nimitz visit brought an unprecedented number of Americans to south India at one time. Several contacts commented to us that the visit was a great success simply for the fact that it was the first American event of this scale in Chennai, south India's largest city. They noted that American travelers tend to focus on North India, and the simple fact that the visit happened in Chennai demonstrated U.S. interest in the region. The sheer number and high quality of the COMREL projects resulted in a large number of interactions between sailors and

marines and the citizens of Chennai. Over 700 crew members participated in a total of 11 COMREL events over the course of three days. Reports from all COMREL events indicated a high degree of goodwill generated both from the work done as well as the interactions between the crew and their Indian host institutions.

14. (U) The sailors' free time while on shore in Chennai generated an estimated \$1.5 million in business, pleasing vendors and local businesses. A state government official responsible for public order told us that the state government feels the visit went off well, most importantly due to the lack of any untoward incidents. "The sailors behaved well and the general public perception was positive," according to the contact. Their incident-free interactions with the locals provided further evidence of a non-threatening, and in fact friendly, U.S. military that aims to get closer to India.

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Rough Seas Swamp Reception, But Pinckney Saves the Day  
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15. (SBU) The July 2 reception planned for on-board Nimitz, which was to be co-hosted by Ambassador Mulford and was intended to double as Chennai's official Independence Day event, had to be cancelled at the last minute when rough seas made it impossible to transport the 400 guests from the pier to the carrier. With the guests already processed through security and assembled on the pier, a significant public relations fiasco loomed until USS Pinckney, moored at pier side, volunteered to host the guests for tours and light refreshments. Thanks to the flexibility and hospitality of Pinckney's crew, the potential fiasco turned into a great success. Ambassador Mulford informally addressed the guests using Pinckney's public address system, and he chatted with many as they toured the vessel. The Ambassador's formal remarks that had been prepared for

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delivery aboard Nimitz were converted into a statement and released to the media, receiving good coverage.

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Bureaucracy Reacts Slowly, Then Overwhelmingly  
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16. (SBU) While the visit generated enormous goodwill, during the set-up we experienced bureaucratic hassles typical of a local and central government still queasy about hosting a U.S. Navy vessel. A plethora of Indian central and state government authorities were involved in the visit, especially for our use of the Port of Chennai and the Chennai airport. Thanks to good pre-existing relationships some of the entities, especially the Chennai Port Trust and the airport authority, were willing to engage cooperatively on advance arrangements. Others maintained a "wait and see" attitude pending the last minute arrival of written approval for the visit from the Ministry of External Affairs.

13. (SBU) Security arrangements were proceeding in a relatively low-key fashion until what Tamil Nadu state government contacts described to us as "urgent calls and written communications" from the Ministry of Defense substantially heightened police attention and activity, perhaps even more than called for. After the central government intervention, which came only two days before Nimitz arrived, the state government and other security agencies urgently reviewed the security situation at each location where sailors were likely to mingle with the public, including all 12 sites planned for community relations (COMREL) projects. Very late in the process, the state government and Chennai Police Commissioner raised security objections about a few of the most public COMREL sites, leading us to cancel or relocate those events. At several of the other sites, police presence bordered on overwhelming. According to state government sources, altogether, 6,500 police officers were deployed, 2,400 of them in plain clothes. Occasionally it seemed that the police were more interested in watching the sailors and monitoring and videotaping their interactions with the local populace than with deterring any possible threats

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## Ruling Politicians Don't Engage; Opposition Protests

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¶7. (SBU) The DMK political party, which governs in Tamil Nadu and supports the ruling UPA coalition on the national level, did not engage about the ship visit, either with us or in the media. It seemed to take the approach, as it has on other foreign policy and defense issues, that those are matters for the central government rather than for the state. We suspect that the cautious DMK leadership was happy to keep away from any political controversy or potential incidents that could have redounded negatively. State government officials at the political level did not participate in any visit-related activities, and the state's Chief Secretary, the top bureaucrat, withdrew from one of the distinguished visitor fly-outs at the last minute.

¶8. (SBU) In contrast, Governor of Tamil Nadu Surjit Singh Barnala, a central government appointee, responded warmly to the visit. He welcomed the senior U.S. Navy leadership to Raj Bhavan, his official office and residence, and after rough seas forced the cancellation of the on-board reception, the Governor asked that his adult grandchildren and senior staff be accommodated for a subsequent tour. Captain Manazir personally arranged for their tour and received them aboard Nimitz.

¶9. (SBU) Tamil Nadu's leading opposition political party, the AIADMK, and others such as the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) were not reticent in voicing their opposition to the visit, and their criticism reached the national media. AIADMK leader J Jayalalithaa tied her criticism to the fears of radiation hazards, while her ally Vaiko of the MDMK added that the ships' presence would "endanger the country's sovereignty and security." With the exception of ideologically-based objections from the CPI, most of

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the local political criticism had more to do with political rivalries and opportunism than with substantive issues. But several protest demonstrations, some numbering over 1,000 participants, gained very little traction among the general population and did nothing to disrupt the visit or the comings and goings of sailors and visitors.

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## Radiation Fears Put to Rest; Weapons Confusion Persists

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¶10. (SBU) Not unlike media elsewhere, the Indian media thrives on headlines and sound-bites, and it is not averse to finding controversy even where it does not exist. Many of the early, pre-arrival reports about Nimitz focused on its nuclear power system and the possibility of radiation leaks. After days of reports and discussion, the fears were largely put to rest by the effective public affairs information from Nimitz about the U.S. Navy's flawless nuclear power record and by helpful statements from Indian nuclear experts (several of whom are persistent critics of the nuclear deal) about the lack of radiation danger posed by nuclear powered vessels. Nonetheless, Indian authorities were quoted as saying they would closely monitor the air and sea while Nimitz was in port.

¶11. (SBU) The media seemed less able to deal with our nuanced official approach not to comment about any presence or absence of nuclear weapons on U.S. warships. While some outlets reported the stance accurately, others variously cited the Consulate, the Ambassador and even Captain Manazir of the Nimitz as confirming the presence of nuclear weapons. (It goes without saying that all hewed strictly to our official stance.)

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: There are a great many operational and logistical lessons-learned from the Nimitz visit, which we will record and/or communicate in other channels. Although we would do many things differently the next time around (and we hope there will be a next time), the balance of the July 2-5 visit is very heavily on the positive side. Consulate General Chennai very much appreciates the huge assistance provided by Embassy New Delhi, particularly the Naval Attache, in supporting the visit and, most of all, the superb

performance of the men and women of USS Nimitz and USS Pinckney.

¶13. (SBU) Embassy New Delhi Comment: The Nimitz visit still resonates in the central government halls in New Delhi, where the positive impact will help reinforce the UPA government's steady approach towards a strategic partnership with the U.S. Friends from across the political spectrum were gleeful at the Left's failure to spark wider opposition to the Nimitz visit. While the Indian military has coveted our cutting-edge technology for years, the professional, approachable demeanor of our sailors will help us build a better partnership based on security and strategic stability.

¶14. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy New Dehli.

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